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ABSTRACT

The communication discipline is ambivalent about public speaking. Even accomplished speakers experience ambivalence in the rush of adrenaline before presenting a speech--knowing its importance yet wondering if they have prepared a speech which is fitting for this audience and occasion. The communication discipline studies communication in a broad range of contexts, from the personal and intimate to the cross-cultural, many of which are not amenable to public speaking. How can teachers of public speaking situate themselves in the discipline's pragmatic experimentation in addressing the twin challenges of diversity and attenuated relational connection? This paper proposes that the National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical Communication provides educators with such a framework. The paper discusses the Credo and also suggests that teachers of public speaking turn to Aristotle's classical rhetoric (which he defined as the counterpart of dialectic) as a starting point for viewing public speaking as an ethical public conversation. It offers the following four characteristics of a pedagogy of public speaking: (1) public speaking as ethical public conversation places a primacy on the intellectual development of public speakers over public speaking mechanics; (2) students of public speaking learn the importance of understanding different viewpoints, especially opposing viewpoints; (3) students practice public speaking as dialectical engagement; and (4) students explore different dimensions of intellectual honesty throughout the speechmaking process. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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BEYOND TRUTH-TELLING: THE CREDO AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

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NCA Convention, 2001

We are ambivalence about public speaking. Every speaker, every student experiences some ambivalence about speaking before an audience. For apprehensive speakers it is anxiety about standing in front of people, coupled with the knowledge that public speaking skills are important for their professional or personal success. Even accomplished speakers experience ambivalence in the rush of adrenaline before presenting a speech--knowing its importance, yet wondering if they have prepared a speech which is fitting for this audience and occasion. Our discipline is ambivalent about public speaking. Our history is rooted in the teaching public speakers. The sophists of ancient Greece were teachers of the arete, or virtue of public speaking so their students could participate in public life. Today, I could use Aristotle's **Rhetoric** as a textbook, although I wonder what a first year student would think about a textbook without pictures, text boxes, or a CD-Rom. Yet public speaking courses seem oddly out of step with our discipline, as represented in the changes of our national association's name from the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking in 1914 to the current National Communication Association.

For centuries the teaching of public speaking or rhetoric was reserved for sons of the elite who learned how public speech was a means for leading, and sometimes bloodlessly vanquishing opponents through persuasion and compelling argument. Our culture broadened the teaching of public speaking from elite leadership to individual development, enabling new voices to become public leaders. These traditional approaches to public speaking fit more or less with our current disciplinary understanding of communication as a complex and multi-faceted process in which

diverse voices construct multiple and diverse realities. Our discipline studies communication in a broad range of contexts, from the personal and intimate to the cross-cultural, many of which are not amenable to public speaking. More to the point, public speaking, especially persuasion and argument on significant problems are seen as often polarizing audiences, heightening differences and increasing defensiveness among communicators who need to work together. Persuasive speaking, especially when it focuses on competitive strategy and argument makes it more difficult to use less competitive communication processes to problem-solve, collaborate and build community. (See Hyde and Bineham, and Pearce and Littlejohn).

Arnett (1990) claims that significant theoretical developments of our discipline arise as a pragmatic response to the communication challenges within our society at particular points in time. If Arnett's claim is accurate, then whether or not we conceptualize a productive role for public speaking in addressing the fundamental communication challenges of our society would affect our disciplinary understanding of public speaking. Following Arnett's lead I assert that our discipline is crafting a response to two, inter-related social challenges. First, is the well recognized challenge of accepting and incorporating diversity into our relationships and communities. The second challenge is to the nature of our relationships, our social connections to one another. Our more traditional bonds of personal and community relationships have become attenuated, leaving us increasingly isolated, even narcissistic (See Bellah, Lasch and Putnam). This reduces our communicative resources to both understand one another and to create and maintain the relationships necessary to sustain community during problem-solving and conflict. As our communities are becoming increasingly diverse and we acknowledge this diversity, there are fewer communicative resources for affirming our connectedness. The pragmatic response of

some in our discipline is to experiment with forms of communication that emphasize collaboration, relationship and community, rather than public speaking, persuasion and argumentation (See for example Barge, Bineham and Hyde, and Pearce and Littlejohn). How can teachers of public speaking situate themselves in our discipline's pragmatic experimentation in addressing the twin challenges of diversity and attenuated relational connection? What is the relevancy of teaching public speaking, if any, in creating and maintaining relationships, with its emphasis on strategy and the presentation of arguments and evidence, as well as its counterpart of critical listening? Effective persuasive communication can and often does foster defensiveness among communicators of diverse viewpoints. Effective public speaking may also polarize relationships. In frustration, some teachers of public speaking may consider themselves as doing little more than teaching students how to participate in public forums or debates that too often degenerate into shrill screeching matches.

Teachers of public speaking are not blind to the problem of its relevancy of to the pragmatics of communication today. Two textbooks, Foss and Foss' **Inviting Transformation: Presentational Speaking for a Changing World** and Jaffe's **Public Speaking: Concepts and Skills for a Diverse Society**, offer alternatives to traditional teaching approaches. Foss and Foss offer a feminist approach to public speaking guided by interactional goals that highlights the relational dimension of public speaking (9-16), while Jaffe's approach systematically integrates cultural diversity. However innovative these non-traditional approaches are, as a discipline we lack a framework for public speaking pedagogy that helps us conceptualize how public speaking itself is relevant in addressing the communication problems of accepting and incorporating diversity while also creating and reinforcing communicative connections between individuals and

groups. I propose that the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication provides us with such a framework. A succinct statement of this framework is found in the Credo's Preamble.

> Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity and respect for self and others.

In this framework the goal of public speaking is to enhance human worth and dignity, not just the speaker's or even the audience's, but human worth and dignity. Through the lens of the Credo, we begin to see that speakers and audiences are connected to others outside of the speech occasion by their relationships, their communities and their cultures. Public speech does not occur in isolation, but is connected to others by the various of relational bonds of both the speaker and the audience. While the speaker recedes in importance she does not disappear within the Credo. Rather the speaker and her connections to the audience, community and culture are brought into relief together.

In the Credo the role and purpose of public speaking changes. Traditional public speaking goals focus on the speaker, the speaker's personal development or specific goals for a speech. With the Credo the speaker broadens the goals of a speech to include fostering responsible thinking and decision-making, enhancing the development of relationships and communities, and enhancing human worth and dignity. The Credo encourages the speaker to think not simply about personal gain, but to consider how this speech may affect others, to consider the public in public speaking.

We can turn to theorists of rhetoric and public speaking for further insights in the Credo as a possible framework for public speaking. A useful starting point is Kenneth Burke's

metaphor of "public speaking as unending conversation."

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (Burke, **Philosophy**, 110-111 )

This is not simply the conversational style of delivery. It is a different way of thinking about public speaking. When we view public speaking as an on-going public conversation, we recognize that issues and topics have a history and future. A speech is more than a single communication episode addressed to a particular audience; it is connected to other acts of communication beyond this single occasion. In this framework speech construction would include asking how a speech would contribute to the public conversation on this topic. In audience analysis a speaker would think of her audience as communicators in this public conversation, who have paused momentarily to listen to this speech before taking their turn to communicate on another occasion. To see the audience as active conversationalists in a public conversation is one way to meet the Credo's standard for ethical communication that respects both self and others, others who are pausing momentarily in the conversation to listen.

One limitation of the conversational metaphor of public speaking is that conversation is more informal, tangential, and spontaneous that is public speaking (Schudson). The spontaneity we prize in private conversation would be counterproductive in public conversation which examines ideas, tests arguments and considers solutions to problems. The special contribution

of public speaking to our disciplinary understanding of communication is that it encourages the evaluation of ideas and the public airing of disagreement. While evaluating ideas or airing disagreements could lead to conflict, even polarization, it also works against a tendency to avoid difficult decisions and to silence the dissenter by papering over disagreements with false agreement or consensus.

Part of our discipline's pragmatic challenge is to develop theories and teaching practices that help us discern a point of balance or harmony between intellectual honesty and integrity, diversity, and creating connection among communicators.[1] Using the Credo to frame this challenge we may ask--How can communication manage our society's tension between diversity and connection in responsible thinking, decision-making and developing relationships and communities? As a teacher of public speaking I am particularly interested in the role of public speaking in answering this question. How can public speaking be a process of enhancing human worth and dignity in which speakers acknowledge and can be receptive to diverse, even opposing points of view.

The development of speakers who listen and are open to understanding different points of view is critical to a pedagogy of public speaking as ethical public conversation. This openness to different points of view requires listening that enacts respect for others by, first, listening to understand then, second, by acknowledging similarities in thinking before, third, identifying the weaknesses of arguments and evidence. But it goes even further, to thinking honestly and imaginatively about evidence, arguments, and points of agreement and disagreement in a search

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[1]See Cunningham for a discussion of discernment as discovery of a point of harmony. While his focus is Aristotle's concept of virtue as a mean between excess and deficiency, his discussion of discernment as a point of harmony is relevant here.

for new ways to think about issues. The unending conversation of public speaking is a participatory dialectic. In the dialectic give and take ideas are developed in a cooperative competition in which it is possible for speakers to transcend the limits of their own points of view. Speakers who disagree with you are worthy of respect and should be listened to, for only by carefully listening and understanding their ideas and arguments, can any speaker participate in this creative dialectic . The notions of public speaking as conversation and participatory dialectic encourage us to understand that it is more than a set of skills for giving a good speech. Public speaking is an intellectual endeavor, a social process for the examination of ideas in which individuals examine ideas and issues together.

How can we accomplish this goal of teaching students to view public speaking as an ethical public conversation? I suggest that we turn to classical rhetoric as a starting point. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the counterpart of dialectic (**Rhetoric** 1354a). Dialectic for Aristotle is a mode of thinking in which one discovers universal or general truths. In contrast, rhetoric is used to discover the right thing to do or believe when the truth is probable or uncertain. Aristotle also discusses the importance of looking at both sides of an issue, one form of dialectic, in helping the speaker to understand an issue and discern what to say.

> We must be able to employ persuasion, just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, not in order that we may in practice employ it in both ways (for we must not make people believe what is wrong), but in order that we may see clearly what the facts are, and that, if another man argues unfairly, we on our part may be able to confute him. No other of the arts draws opposite conclusions: dialectic and rhetoric alone do this. Both these arts draw opposite conclusions impartially. Nevertheless, the underlying facts do not lend themselves equally well to the contrary views. No; things that are true and things that are better are, by their nature, practically always easier to prove and easier to believe in (1354b)

Aristotle's discomfort with the province of rhetoric, where the truth or truths are unclear,

uncertain or probable, is evident in this passage. However, his idea that being able to argue and persuade on more than one side of an issue is important for speakers to understand an issue and discern what they should say in a speech. In addition, this intellectual engagement is a basis for public speaking as an ethical conversation. Cicero in **De Oratore** specifically refers to the importance of the ability of speak well on contradictory sides of an issue in describing the ideal orator.

> ...if ever a person shall arise who shall have abilities to deliver opinions on both sides of a question on all subjects, after the manner of Aristotle, and, from a knowledge of the precepts of that philosopher, to deliver two contradictory orations on every conceivable topic, ...shall unite with those powers rhetorical skill, and practice and exercise in speaking, he will be the true, the perfect, the only orator. For neither without the nervous eloquence of the forum, can an orator have sufficient weight, dignity and force; nor without variety of learning, sufficient elegance and judgement." (214-215)

To speak well whatever the topic, a public speaker needs to understand different or opposing points of view, not to refute those who disagree, but to exercise good judgment in discerning what to say. The best way to explore a different point of view is to give a speech from that standpoint. What better means to test the quality of a student speaker's listening and research? What better test of a student speaker's respect of those with whom she disagrees than to give a speech from their point of view without caricature or irony, but with understanding and sensitivity?

Aristotle and Cicero remind us that public speaking is a means of intellectual development for speakers, a means for helping speakers learn how to participate in the dialectical transformation of thinking. Students who take the time to listen and understand different points of view on an issue as part of the process of creating a speech participate in the intellectual dialectic of public speaking. In our classrooms when we limit this dialectic to a single debate or

even a Question and Answer period after a speech, we teach students that public speaking is an episode, not a conversation. We unknowingly raise a barrier to students' exploration of opposing points of view. Restricting public speaking to the speech event of a single speech or debate limits the intellectual challenges of the dialectical process of public speaking. When public speaking is framed as an ethical conversation, students can be encouraged to honestly explore and understand diverse and contradictory viewpoints in an effort to discern a creative solution, some common ground on a controversial issue, or simply to better understand the nature of the disagreement.

When we see the pedagogy of ethical public speaking as including the dialectic of speaking well on more than one side of an issue, we have a means to teach audience analysis and adaptation as an intellectual process with integrity, rather than one that is easily manipulated for personal gain . In preparing a speech for an public conversation, audience analysis and adaptation becomes a process of discerning the right thing to say in a speech for a particular audience on a particular occasion by listening and understanding the points of views of others who participate in the public conversation on this issue. Some members of the audience may have already participated in that conversation as speakers or may do so in the future. Audience analysis becomes more than a survey of opinions; it is an exploration of the diverse ideas and arguments, the diverse ways of thinking and understanding an issue.

Using the Credo as a pedagogical framework for public speaking enables us to think about public speaking as a means of communicating with personal integrity and respect for others about difficult issues. Using Burke's notions of public speaking as conversation emphasizes how a speech is not simply an isolated communication act addressed to the immediate audience, but a

communication act with a history that may contribute to future communication on this topic. A public speech may have ripple effects beyond the relationship between the speaker and audience, to unseen others in relationships of the speaker and audience members. When we view public speaking as an ethical public conversation, what a speaker says matters.

A pedagogy of public speaking as ethical public conversation teaches that public speaking is a social process in which speakers explore ideas, problems and possible solutions with personal integrity and respect for others. I offer the following four characteristics of a pedagogy of public speaking as ethical public conversation. I do not consider this an exhaustive list, but a starting point for further discussion. First, a pedagogy of public speaking as ethical public conversation places a primacy on the intellectual development of public speakers over public speaking mechanics. Teaching public speaking is teaching students ways of seeing and thinking about issues and problems in a public forum and how to present their thinking to an audience. Second, students of public speaking learn the importance of understanding different viewpoints, especially opposing viewpoints, before evaluating them. Understanding must be achieved through careful research and actually listening to people talk about their views. Third, students practice public speaking as dialectical engagement. To experience the possibilities of dialectical transformation students must have practice giving speeches from diverse or opposing viewpoints on an issue and the opportunity to explore possibilities about how to connect, transcend or transform those viewpoints. An individual student presenting speeches on more than one side of an issue can be an exercise in intellectually honest understanding, provided that the opposing viewpoint is presented accurately and without caricature. Without some practice of dialectically engaging opposing viewpoints students are poorly prepared intellectually to explore the creative

possibilities of dialectical transformation or to recognize the importance of common ground on difficult issues. Fourth, students explore different dimensions of intellectual honesty throughout the speech-making process. This ranges from accuracy in presenting evidence and avoiding fallacies in arguments to identifying legitimate similarities and differences in diverse or opposing viewpoints. Intellectually honest public speaking may be courageous when a speaker presents an important dissenting viewpoint or when a she makes a case for a common ground on a polarized issue in which parties are more committed to maintaining their differences than finding a possible basis for problem-solving or agreement.

Today, I opened this paper referring to the ambivalence that pervades public speaking, both for speakers and our discipline. The ambivalence created by public speaking apprehension will always be there. Our disciplinary ambivalence, I think, is a different situation. Our society's challenge of incorporating diversity into relationships and communities whose social connections have become attenuated and strained is also a disciplinary challenge to find new ways to think about and teach communication. The question facing teachers of public speaking is can we conceptualize public speaking and its pedagogy in new ways which address this challenge? The Credo for Ethical Communication offers us a starting point in this exploration.

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